Édition du groupe « Ebooks libres et gratuits »



Maurice Leblanc

THE BRIDGE THAT BROKE

paru dans *Arsène Lupin intervenes*

(1929)

Table des matières

1

It was a Tuesday afternoon in midsummer. Paris was deserted—a city of the dead. Jim Barnett sat in his office with his feet on his desk. He was in his shirt-sleeves. A glass of lager beer stood at his elbow. A green blind shut out the blazing sun. To the prejudiced eye, Barnett's appearance would have suggested slumber, and this impression would have been strengthened by his rather loud and rhythmical breathing.

A sharp tap on his door made him bring his feet down with a jerk and sit bolt upright.

'No! It can't be! The heat must be affecting my eyesight.' Barnett affected elaborate astonishment.

Inspector Béchoux, for it was he, closed the door behind him and observed with some distaste his friend's state of deshabille. It was a fad with Béchoux to present at all times a perfectly groomed appearance. On this sweltering day he was cool and immaculate, not a hair out of place.

'How *do* you do it?' Barnett demanded, sinking back wearily into his chair.

'Do what?'

'Look like a fashion-plate off the ice. Damned superior, I call it!'

Béchoux smiled with conscious pride.

'It's quite simple,' he remarked modestly.

‘But I take it the case you are working on is *not* quite so simple, or you wouldn’t be coming to the enemy camp for assistance, eh, Béchoux?’

Béchoux reddened. It was a very sore point with him that in his difficulties he had several times been forced to accept Jim Barnett’s help. For Barnett *was* helpful—almost uncannily so. The trouble was that he always managed to help himself as well as others.

‘What is it this time? I’ve all day to spare—and to-morrow—and the day after. The Barnett Agency doesn’t get many clients at this time of year, though it does guarantee “Information Free.” I hear that they can’t even get any deadheads to go to the theatres—pouf!’

‘How would you like a trip into the country?’

‘Béchoux, you are a blessing, albeit heavily disguised. What is the case, though?’

Inspector Béchoux grinned involuntarily.

‘It’s a real mystery—the sudden death of the famous scientist, Professor Saint-Prix.’

‘I know the name, but I haven’t read about his death in the papers. Has he been murdered?’

Inspector Béchoux’s countenance took on a sphinx-like expression.

‘That’s what I want you to help me to determine. I have my car at a garage near here. Pack a bag and come right along. I’ll tell you the facts of the case as we go.’

Reluctantly Barnett got up, drained the last of his beer, and made his simple preparations for the trip.

2

A quarter of an hour later they were spinning out of Paris in Inspector Béchoux's little two-seater.

'I was called in on the case,' said Béchoux, 'by Doctor Desportes of Beauvray—an old friend. He rang up on Monday morning to say there was going to be an inquest at Beauvray—Professor Saint-Prix, the scientist, had been killed by falling into the stream at the bottom of his garden.'

'Nothing very mysterious in that.'

'Ah, but wait. The professor was crossing the stream by a plank bridge, and that bridge gave way under him and precipitated the old man into the water. His head hit a sharp rock and he was killed instantaneously.'

'Was the bridge rotten, then?'

Inspector Béchoux shook his head.

'My doctor friend informed me that though the police had not been called in, they would have to be. The bridge was perfectly sound, but—it had been *sawed through*!'

Barnett whistled.

'And so you went to Beauvray at once?'

'Yes.'

'And what did you find?'

'A queer situation. The professor had a little house where he lived with his daughter, Thérèse Saint-Prix. Joined on to the house was a very fine laboratory. The garden sloped down, first a lawn and then a dense shrubbery, to a stream, sunk deep between rocky banks. A stout plank bridge was the means of crossing from the Saint-Prix garden to the adjoining property of the Villa Emeraude, the home of a married couple, the Lenormands.

'Louis Lenormand is a young stockbroker. His wife, Cécile, is a delicate, beautiful girl. Last Sunday afternoon, Madame Lenormand was going to have tea with Thérèse Saint-Prix. Louis Lenormand was spending the week-end in Paris with his invalid mother, but was expected back that night.

'Madame Lenormand went through the garden of the Villa Eméraude down to the stream. When she got there, she pulled up short and gave a cry of horror! The plank bridge was broken, and in the water lay the body of Professor Saint-Prix. She rushed back to the house for help, and then fainted.'

'Well, where do I come in?'

'Almost as soon as they had got Madame Lenormand to bed, and were breaking the news of her father's death to Thérèse Saint-Prix, Louis Lenormand arrived in his car, driving like a fury. He was pale and trembling. The first words he spoke were: "Am I in time? Tell me—tell me. My God, I've been a fool!" He was like a madman and rushed upstairs to his wife's room without waiting for an answer from the astonished servants. His wife's maid told him what had happened. At first he did not seem to understand. Then he stole to his wife's bedside and kissed her hands

passionately, weeping and murmuring, "Cécile, I am a murderer." '

'Still I confess I don't understand. You have your murder—you have your murderer—self-confessed. What more do you want?'

'Well, the thing is this. We checked up on Louis Lenormand's movements while he was away from Beauvray. We know that the bridge was perfectly safe on the Saturday morning, for a gardener crossed by it. Now all Saturday afternoon Lenormand spent at his mother's bedside. He sat with her again after dinner until eleven o'clock, and then turned into bed himself. Old Madame Lenormand's maid and cook heard him kicking off his shoes in the room next to theirs. And the maid swears that in the small hours she heard him switch off his light, so she supposes he must have been lying awake reading. All Sunday morning he did not stir out, so it is out of the question that he could possibly have sawed through the bridge between the gardens at Beauvray.'

'What made you establish such a thorough alibi for your suspect?'

'Madame Lenormand, though still weak from the shock, has recovered consciousness. Her belief in her husband's innocence is absolute. Her one aim is to clear him. She insisted on these investigations being made. He will not say a word in his own defence. It's all very mystifying.'

'You say that Louis Lenormand was not expected back until Sunday evening. Do you know why he left Paris so much earlier?'

'That,' said Béchoux, 'is a curious point. Apparently he was alone in one of the rooms in his mother's flat, reading a

book while the old lady had a nap after her lunch. The servants were both in the kitchen, and testify that suddenly, about three o'clock, he rushed in to them and said he was going home at once but would not disturb his mother to say good-bye.'

'And the motive? What reason could Louis Lenormand have to murder his neighbour?'

Inspector Béchoux shrugged his shoulders.

'I have an idea, and Doctor Desportes is making some investigations on my behalf.'

'Is there no one else who comes under suspicion? What about Madame Lenormand?'

3

Inspector Béchoux was silent. The car swung off the main road up a shady avenue. They turned into the drive of the Villa Eméraude. They were met outside the house by Doctor Desportes, who announced:

‘The Beauvray police have arrested Monsieur Lenormand, but I have been busy on the telephone to headquarters, and you are now officially in charge of the case.’

‘But his alibi—he was in Paris all the time—he could not have sawed through the bridge!’

The doctor looked grave.

‘Monsieur Lenormand had a latch-key to his mother’s flat. The Paris police have inquired at the garage where he kept his car and they find that he took it out shortly after midnight and told a mechanic that he was unable to sleep because of the heat, and was going to try and get a breath of air in the Bois. He returned after two in the morning.’

‘Which,’ observed Barnett, ‘gave him plenty of time to drive out here, saw through the bridge, and get back to Paris. And what the maid heard was Monsieur Lenormand switching off his light when he really went to bed at last. Both servants must have been asleep when he slipped out of the flat.’

The doctor looked at Barnett in some curiosity, for he spoke in such an assured tone and was so obviously no subordinate of Inspector Béchoux.

Barnett smiled and bowed easily.

'Allow me to remedy my friend Béchoux's deplorable lack of manners. Jim Barnett, at your service, doctor.'

'A friend of mine, who has helped me on more than one occasion,' said Béchoux, not so easily. 'Come, doctor, what news have you for me after your confidential interview with the bank manager at Beauvray?'

'Poor Monsieur Lenormand.' The doctor shook his head sadly. 'I wish it had been a policeman who had found it out. But justice cannot be cheated. I have established that for the past two years Monsieur Lenormand has from time to time paid quite large cheques into the banking account of Professor Saint-Prix.'

'Blackmail?' Barnett and Béchoux came out with the word simultaneously.

'There we have at least the motive!' cried Béchoux, in purely professional triumph. 'Monsieur Lenormand must have had a very good reason for sawing through that bridge—'

'But he did not do it!'

A young woman, deathly pale, wearing a brilliant Chinese wrap, was coming slowly down the stairs into the hall, clutching at the banister for support. A maid followed anxiously behind her.

'I repeat,' she said in a voice trembling with suppressed emotion, 'Louis is innocent!'

'Madame,' said Béchoux, 'allow me to present my friend, Jim Barnett.' Barnett bowed low. 'If any one can achieve the impossible and establish your husband's innocence, it is he! I admit, however, that I originally brought him here because your husband's alibi upset all my deductions. Now that alibi no longer holds, and I have no objection if Barnett transfers his assistance to you. Provided'—he grew thoughtful and did not finish his sentence.

'Oh,' cried Madame Lenormand, taking Barnett's hands impulsively in hers, 'save my husband, and I will give you any reward you care to name.'

Barnett shook his head.

'I ask no reward, madame, beyond the privilege of serving you. Never shall it be said that the Barnett Agency descended to base commercialism in accepting a fee for its labours.'

4

At this point a gendarme came running in from the garden with a pair of rubber boots.

'Where did you find those?' asked Béchoux.

'In a garden shed at the back of the grounds of the villa.'

The boots were covered in fresh mud. In this sweltering weather the only moisture on the ground would be along the channel of the stream. Cécile Lenormand gave a sharp exclamation.

'Your husband's?'

She nodded reluctantly.

'Well,' said Barnett, 'let's go and have a look at the stream—and we ought to take those with us. *À bientôt*, madame.'

Béchoux and Barnett, accompanied by the doctor and the gendarme, walked through the garden and down to the stream. The water was running swiftly over the rocks below.

Béchoux looked unwillingly at the muddy foothold below the broken bridge, and then at his shining new patent leather shoes topped by snowy spats.

'I'll do it!' cried Barnett gallantly, and, seizing a boot from Béchoux, he leapt down, so that he sank ankle-deep in the mud beside the torrent.

'Are there any marks?' asked the doctor eagerly.

‘Yes,’ said Barnett. ‘And they were made by these boots!’

‘A clear case!’ said Béchoux. ‘I need never have brought you along, Barnett, and I’m afraid it’s no use your transferring your services to Madame Lenormand. Really, I think you’d better hop back to Paris.’

‘My dear Béchoux!’ said Barnett, in tones of shocked surprise. ‘Go off and leave a client in the lurch? Do you imagine the Barnett Agency shirks what appears to be a losing case?’

‘Then you definitely regard Madame Lenormand as your client?’

‘Why not?’

He handed up the boot and grovelled a few minutes longer in the mud. Then he clambered up again, somewhat apoplectic of countenance.

‘Now,’ he said briskly, ‘suppose we visit Mademoiselle Saint-Prix and inspect both the properties prior to consuming beef and wine at the village inn.’

‘What good can that do? I have my case.’

‘And I have my own way of working. If you prefer it, I will pursue my course quite independently on behalf of Madame Lenormand, and you needn’t see me again until I, too, have my case.’

But this course Béchoux viewed with some apprehension, so he and Barnett made their way round by the road to the Saint-Prix house.

On the way there Barnett solemnly handed Béchoux a very grubby sealed envelope.

'Will you please keep that carefully for me?' he said, 'and don't let it out of your inner pocket until I ask for it.'

'What is it?'

Barnett smiled mysteriously and laid a finger to his nose.

'A valuable diamond, old horse!'

'Idiot!'

At this point, they had arrived at the late professor's house. Here all the blinds were drawn. Barnett observed that the paint was peeling off the walls, and the matting in the passage was worn and old. A down-at-heel servant girl showed them into a small boudoir where they were received by Thérèse Saint-Prix.

She was quite a young woman—a girl in years, but strikingly poised and mature in bearing and appearance, tall and supple. She wore black, with no ornament of any kind. Her smooth black hair, parted in the middle, was drawn off her ears into a knot low on her neck. Her grave, dark eyes searched the faces of the two men—she had already met Béchoux, and presumed Barnett to be an assistant.

5

She sat, very pale, though calm, in a high-backed chair, carved. Only her strong white hands strained at her handkerchief as if there alone her grief found outlet.

Barnett bowed low.

‘Accept my profound sympathy, mademoiselle,’ he murmured. ‘Your father’s death will be felt by all France!’

‘Yes,’ the girl said, in a low voice. ‘Five years ago he discovered the antiseptic which is now used in every hospital. That brought him renown, though it did not mend our fortunes when we lost our money in Russia.’ She gave a pathetic little smile.

‘How was that?’

‘My father was half Russian. He invested everything in his brother’s oil-wells near St Petersburg. Revolutionaries burned the factory and murdered my uncle. After that loss, we lived very modestly. But even in poverty my father was generous. And he would take no money for his discovery. He said his reward was to have been able to help in the great war against disease. When my father died, however, he was on the verge of completing another discovery of a different kind—one that would have brought him wealth as well as fame.’

‘What was this discovery?’

‘A secret process which would have revolutionised the dye industry. But I know scarcely anything about it—my father was secretive in some matters and would not let me help him in his experiments.’ Again she smiled sadly. ‘I could only be his housekeeper, never his assistant. And my chief occupation was to interest myself in the garden. Cécile and I used to spend hours planning our flower-beds. She was always so kind, helping me with gifts of plants. She was coming to tea on that afternoon, you know, to advise me about some fruit-trees. Poor Cécile! What will she do?’

‘You are aware, mademoiselle,’ said Béchoux, rather stiffly, as if to recall his presence to her consciousness, ‘that Louis Lenormand is under arrest? The case is practically complete against him.’

She nodded.

‘What made Louis Lenormand do such a thing? Can you imagine?’ Barnett asked abruptly.

‘*If* he did it,’ said Thérèse gently. ‘We must remember that nothing is proved yet.’

‘But what reason can he have had? Well off, prosperous, married to a charming wife—’

‘Against the wishes of her family,’ interposed the girl. ‘Louis Lenormand was a penniless clerk, and it was by speculating with his wife’s money that he became rich. The family all thought that was why he wanted to marry her, though, of course, it was untrue. And Cécile was passionately fond of her husband—she grudged every minute he spent elsewhere. Indeed, I used to wonder if she was not a little jealous of the time he spent with my father in the laboratory. I wondered, too, if she minded his helping my father

occasionally with loans of money. But I do wrong if I suggest that Cécile is not all that is generous. Only, where her husband is concerned, if you understand, I have often wondered if she can be quite normal.’

Barnett looked distinctly interested, though Béchoux was obviously bored.

‘Mademoiselle,’ said Barnett, ‘I have a favour to ask of you. May I see the laboratory in which your father worked?’

Without another word she led the way down a passage and through a baize door, which opened into the airy, white building.

6

The laboratory was in contrast to the house itself. Here all was new and spotless. Phials were ranged in orderly rows along the shelves; clean vessels sparkled on the benches. In all this dazzling whiteness there was but one dark patch—a muddy coat trailing from a stool.

'What's that?' asked Barnett.

'My poor father's coat,' said Thérèse. 'They carried him in here and removed his coat when they were trying to restore life. But he must have been killed instantaneously.'

'And these are all his chemicals?' Barnett indicated the gleaming phials.

'Yes—to think he will never use them again!' She averted her head slightly. 'Ah, how my father loved this place; and so, I always thought, did Louis Lenormand. Cécile did not, but that was because she did not understand. She loved flowers, everything beautiful; but science she thought ugly and repellent. Why, I have seen her shake her fist at the laboratory windows when my father and her husband were talking there together.'

'Well, mademoiselle, I thank you very much for being so helpful to us in what must be painful and terrible circumstances so far as you are concerned. And I won't hide from you that I have already made one little discovery.'

'What's that?' demanded Béchoux.

‘Aha, I thought you would want to know. Well, it is that I am on the track of the motive for the murder. You have the murderer; I shall soon have the motive. And there we are!’ Then, hastily dissembling his cheerfulness, he took a dignified farewell of Thérèse Saint-Prix, and departed with Béchoux.

At the garden gate they were met by the doctor and the gendarme.

‘We’ve been waiting for you,’ the former observed. ‘We have found the instrument of the crime.’

The gendarme held up a medium-sized saw.

‘Where did you find it?’ asked Béchoux eagerly.

‘Among some laurel bushes, near the tool-shed where the boots were discovered.’

‘See,’ cried Béchoux, turning eagerly to Barnett, ‘it is plainly marked “Villa Eméraude.” ’

‘Very interesting,’ observed Barnett. ‘Béchoux, I feel your case is becoming ever clearer. I almost wish I had never left Paris; it’s just as hot here. In fact, I am getting distinctly warm. What about a drink at the local hostelry? I hope you will join us, doctor?’ He beamed a comprehensive invitation.

‘I shall be delighted to join you and your colleague,’ answered the doctor.

At the word ‘colleague’ Béchoux smiled wryly. He was wishing pretty heartily that he had never brought Barnett into the case.

The sultry, airless evening was followed by a night storm, but Barnett slept through the thunderclaps. The next day dawned clear and much cooler.

Béchoux informed his friend that Louis Lenormand was to be examined by the magistrate up at the Saint-Prix house that afternoon.

'I am going to complete the necessary formalities this morning,' he announced, sipping his coffee. 'Won't you change your mind and pop back to Paris?'

'I'm sorry my society bores you so badly,' said Barnett sorrowfully, and sought solace in a third cup of chocolate.

'Oh, very well!' Béchoux was inclined to be huffy. He left the inn, and Barnett attacked another lightly boiled egg.

When he had finished his breakfast, Jim Barnett spruced himself up and made his way to the Villa Eméraude. Madame Lenormand received him in her sitting-room, and for over an hour he remained talking with her. Towards the end of the interview they moved into Louis Lenormand's study, and Béchoux, coming up the drive, could see through the open window Barnett and Cécile Lenormand bending over an open desk together.

Barnett came out into the hall and greeted his friend as if the Villa Eméraude was his own ancestral hall.

'Welcome, welcome, Béchoux. But I'm afraid you can't see Madame Lenormand. She's feeling over tired already—a little hysterical—and she must rest in view of her ordeal this afternoon. A charming woman; in many ways a delightful woman—' He did not finish, but paused thoughtfully.

Béchoux grunted. ‘I came up to find you,’ he said, ‘to tell you a bit of news.’

‘What’s that?’

‘We searched Louis Lenormand, and found on him a note-book in which he made entries of payments made by him during the past six months or so. One of these, dated three weeks ago, was for five thousand francs, paid to “S.” and against it was written “*The last payment.*” Investigation has shown that this amount was paid to Professor Saint-Prix. The case is pretty black against Lenormand, Barnett, and I really should advise you to quit now.’

But all Barnett answered was:

‘I’m ready for a spot of lunch. Are you?’

The inquiry began at three o’clock. It was held in the narrow dining-room of the Saint-Prix house. Louis Lenormand sat at one end, between two gendarmes, never raising his eyes from the ground. The magistrates and Béchoux conferred together in low tones. Dr Desportes gazed thoughtfully out of the window. Barnett ushered in Madame Lenormand. She was very pale and leaned on his arm for support. She took her seat in a low chair, looking all around her with quick, nervous glances. Her husband seemed not to observe her, so sunken was he in dejection.

Then Thérèse Saint-Prix entered the room. Her presence was like a calming influence. She went over to Cécile Lenormand and laid a compassionate hand on her shoulder, but the other started away violently.

7

Almost immediately the examining magistrate began. He took the medical evidence, which Doctor Desportes gave in even, colourless tones, clearly establishing that the professor had been killed through his fall into the stream.

After this came the questioning of Louis Lenormand.

‘Did you take your car out late on Sunday night from the Paris garage?’

‘I did.’

‘Where did you drive?’

The prisoner was silent.

‘Answer me!’

‘I really forget.’

Béchoux gave Barnett a significant look.

‘Did you pay Professor Saint-Prix large sums of money from time to time?’

‘I did.’

‘For what reason?’

Louis Lenormand hesitated, and then replied haltingly:

‘To assist him in his researches.’

Béchoux’s pitying contempt was unmistakable.

A small note-book was produced.

‘This is yours?’

The prisoner assented.

‘Here you have entered various payments made by you. There is one of five thousand francs dated a month ago which says: “S. *The last payment*” Was that a cheque paid to Professor Saint-Prix?’

‘It was.’

‘Won’t you tell us why you were being—blackmailed? Perhaps the circumstances—’ The magistrate seemed anxious to give Lenormand a chance to defend himself.

‘I have nothing to say.’

‘Is it a fact that Professor Saint-Prix was in the habit of coming to your house for a game of chess on Sunday afternoons?’

‘Yes,’ said the young man sullenly.

‘Did you saw through the bridge?’

The prisoner was silent.

‘You do not deny that these are your boots?’ Béchoux produced them. The prisoner looked slightly startled but made no protest.

‘I submit,’ said Béchoux, ‘that the case is clear.’

‘Yes, indeed,’ said Barnett, ‘there never was a clearer. As clear as crystal—as a diamond—Béchoux, won’t you produce that little envelope I entrusted to your care?’

With a premonition of disaster, Béchoux extracted the rather grubby envelope from his inner pocket.

'Open it!' commanded Barnett.

He did so, and held up—a diamond earring!

Cécile Lenormand gave a little gasp. Her husband started up and then sank back into his chair.

'Can any one identify this little exhibit of jewellery?' Barnett asked the assembly.

Doctor Desportes looked intensely worried. Poor man, his quiet life was being rudely disturbed!

'Those earrings—' He paused. 'They were given to Madame Lenormand by her husband not very long ago!'

'Is that so?' Béchoux asked of Louis Lenormand.

The latter nodded.

Cécile had bowed her head in her hands. Thérèse reached out a pitying hand to her, but she shook it off wildly.

'You have seen these earrings,' pursued Barnett, 'but you can't guess where I found one of them. Inspector Béchoux will tell you, though. In the mud by the stream, at that point where the body of Professor Saint-Prix was found lying dead!'

'Can you tell us, madame,' inquired the magistrate of Cécile Lenormand, 'whether you were wearing those earrings on Sunday afternoon?'

Looking up, the young woman shook her head.

‘I can’t—remember—when I last wore them!’ she said in a confused manner.

‘You must forgive my asking you, madame, but you must tell us now whether you left the villa at any time during Saturday night.’

There was the merest hint of menace in the smooth tones. Louis Lenormand’s mouth twitched painfully.

‘I—I—’ She looked from one face to another of those gathered in the room. ‘Why, I believe I did. It was so hot… I went out into the garden for a little…’

‘Was this before you retired for the night?’

‘Yes—no—not exactly. I had gone to my room, but I had not undressed. I had told my maid to go to bed. Then I felt oppressed by the heat and went out into the garden through the French window of my boudoir.’

‘So that no one heard you come or go?’

‘No one, monsieur.’

‘And, on Sunday afternoon, you were going to tea with Mademoiselle Saint-Prix?’

‘Yes.’

‘At four o’clock?’

‘That’s so—’

Thérèse Saint-Prix’s voice here interrupted gently, like a low-toned bell.

8

'Don't you remember, Cécile, the arrangement was that you should come over soon after three to me, but that if you did not arrive by four, I was to come up to the villa? Why, I was just getting ready to come when—when *it* happened. You see,' she turned to address the magistrate, 'we were going to make gardening plans together, but just lately Cécile hasn't been feeling too well, and she thought it possible that she might not feel up to walking about the garden in the hot sun. So I was quite prepared for her to stay resting in her boudoir that afternoon, and then we would have had tea together there.'

'Is that true, madame?' asked the magistrate of Cécile Lenormand.

'I—I can't remember. Perhaps that was the arrangement.'

9

'But—but'—Béchoux was stammering under the force of his discovery—'if you, mademoiselle, had been just a few minutes quicker in getting ready to go to the villa, you might yourself have been killed!'

'The question that presents itself,' said Barnett, in a level voice, 'is—for whom was the trap laid? Did Louis Lenormand lay it to kill Professor Saint-Prix? We must remember that the old professor was absent-minded, and was in the custom of going to play chess with his neighbour on Sunday afternoon. Or, was the attack directed by Louis Lenormand against his own wife? Or against Mademoiselle Saint-Prix?'

'Or,' said Béchoux, annoyed to find Barnett calmly taking the floor, 'did Madame Lenormand saw through the bridge because she guessed Professor Saint-Prix would be coming that way? Remember what Mademoiselle Saint-Prix has told us—'

Thérèse Saint-Prix was covered with confusion.

'I never meant you to take it that way,' she cried. 'Why, I only said Cécile sometimes appeared a little jealous of her husband's intimacy with my poor father. But that was nothing! Poor darling, she was always jealous where Louis—Monsieur Lenormand—was concerned. Why, she even at one time—' She broke off and was silent.

'She even what, mademoiselle?' asked the magistrate.

'Oh, it's too silly. But at one time I used to wonder if she were not a little jealous of *me*! I was giving Monsieur Lenormand lessons in Russian—a language he was eager to learn—and so we were naturally together a good deal. I even wondered if Cécile could be—could be spying on us—she seemed so queer. But please don't misunderstand me, I'm not suggesting a thing against her.'

'But mademoiselle is right,' said Barnett gravely. 'Madame Lenormand had the most odd ideas concerning her husband and mademoiselle—almost unbelievable. She imagined—I ask you! That Mademoiselle Saint-Prix had almost forced Monsieur Lenormand into having Russian lessons, in the hope that she might thereby succeed in teaching him something besides Russian! She had the absurd hallucination that she once saw her husband kissing you, mademoiselle, in the little summer-house at the bottom of the garden. And yet, and this is the most unbelievable part of all, she never really doubted her husband—she believed that, like so many men, he was capable of being superficially attracted without being guilty of any serious infidelity. A trusting woman, one would say. But her clemency hardly extended to her supposed rival.

'Now, on Sunday afternoon a woman telephoned from Beauvray to Louis Lenormand at his mother's flat and told him something terrible—so terrible, in fact, as to bring him racing home in his car to try and avert disaster. But he was too late. The tragedy had occurred. Only, it was something quite different from what he had feared! Today you have before you a woman telling a vague, unsubstantiated story of having wandered about on Saturday night in her garden—of having, *perhaps*, asked her friend to come to tea instead of going to tea with her. And, on the other hand, you must

picture to yourselves a woman mad with jealousy and fury—a woman telephoning in words of ice-cold rage—"She shall no longer come between us—she and she alone is the obstacle of our love—it is because of her that you have turned a deaf ear to my entreaties, but soon, soon the obstacle will be removed!"

'Gentlemen, which story are you going to believe?'

'There can be but one answer to that,' observed the magistrate, 'if you have proof of what you say. And much is explained if Cécile Lenormand did indeed telephone to her husband in Paris that afternoon!'

'Did I say that Cécile Lenormand telephoned?' asked Barnett, looking most surprised. 'But that would be quite contrary to my own belief—and to the truth!'

'Then what on earth do you mean?'

'Exactly what I say. The telephone call from Beauvray to Paris was made by a woman maddened by jealousy and frustration, by a desire to annihilate her rival in Louis Lenormand's affections—'

'But that woman is Cécile Lenormand.'

'Not a bit of it! I can assure you she had nothing whatever to do with the telephone call.'

'Then whom are you accusing?'

'The other woman!'

'But there were only two—Cécile Lenormand and Thérèse Saint-Prix.'

‘Precisely, and since I am *not* accusing Cécile Lenormand, that means that I *do* accuse…’

Barnett left the sentence unfinished. There was a horrified silence. Here was a direct and totally unforeseen accusation! Thérèse Saint-Prix, who was at this moment standing near the window, hesitated for a long moment, pale and trembling. Suddenly she sprang over the low balcony and down into the garden.

10

The doctor and a gendarme made to pursue her, but found themselves in collision with Barnett, who was barring the way. The gendarme protested hotly:

'But we shall have her escaping!'

'I think not,' said Barnett.

'You're right,' said the doctor, appalled, 'but I fear something else—something ghastly!… Yes, look, look! She's running towards the stream… towards the bridge where her father was killed.'

'What next?' came from Barnett with terrible calm.

He stood aside. The doctor and the gendarme were out of the window like lightning, and he closed it behind them. Then, turning to the magistrate, he said:

'Do you understand the whole business now, monsieur? Is it quite clear to you? It was Thérèse Saint-Prix who, after trying vainly to rouse the passion of Louis Lenormand beyond the passing fancy of a flirtation—Thérèse Saint-Prix who, starved for years of all enjoyment and luxury, was suddenly blinded by hatred of Cécile Lenormand. She was too proud to believe that Louis Lenormand genuinely did not want her love and was devoted to his wife. She thought that if once Cécile Lenormand were out of the way, she would come into her own. So she planned the appalling, cold-blooded murder of her rival, and—compassed the death of her own father! In the night she sawed through the bridge—

there was no one to see her. So blinded was she by her passions that next day, just before the tragedy would occur, she telephoned Louis Lenormand to tell him what she had done.

'Confronted by the utterly unexpected result of her strategy, she immediately planned to throw the guilt on to Cécile Lenormand and so at one stroke save herself and get her rival out of the way. It was with this in view that she stole one of Cécile's earrings and dropped it on Sunday night into the ditch, and then told her tale of Cécile having been jealous of the old professor. Then, here in this room, she was struck with a more plausible idea altogether—she tried to get us all to believe that the bridge had been sawed through with the object of killing *her* and not her father at all!'

'How do you account for the boots and the saw?' asked the magistrate.

'The Lenormands and the Saint-Prix shared a tool-shed and their garden implements and so on were used in common.'

'How do you know all about Thérèse Saint-Prix?' asked Lenormand, speaking for the first time.

'I helped him to find out,' said Cécile swiftly. 'My dear, I realised all along how you were placed in the matter, but my pride kept me from speaking to you. I was afraid you would think I was being jealous, and trying to find something to throw in your face because my parents tried to prevent our marriage.'

'Then you forgive me?'

For answer she ran across the room to her husband, and her arms went round his neck.

11

'But,' objected the magistrate, 'that entry in the note-book of "the last payment"—what did that mean?'

'Merely,' said Barnett, 'that Professor Saint-Prix had told Louis Lenormand that this was the last loan he would need, as his discovery was on the verge of completion.'

'And that discovery—?'

'Was something which would have revolutionised the dye industry. Doubtless he was going eagerly up to the Villa Eméraude to show it to his friend, and the stream washed it out of his dying grasp. What a loss!'

'And where *did* Monsieur Lenormand drive that night?'

'He shall tell us himself.'

'I drove,' said the erstwhile prisoner, 'into the country a little way. I honestly could not say exactly where. I did so because it was very hot and I couldn't sleep. But there is no one who could prove the truth of what I say.'

At this point the gendarme came back, rather pale.

Barnett signed to him to speak.

'She is dead!' he faltered. 'She threw herself down—there, where the professor was killed! The doctor sent me to tell you.'

The magistrate looked grave.

‘Perhaps, after all, it is for the best,’ he said. ‘But for you, monsieur,’ he turned to Barnett and shook his hand, ‘there might have been a grave miscarriage of justice.’

Béchoux stood awkwardly silent.

‘Come, Béchoux,’ said Barnett, clapping him on the shoulder, ‘let’s be off and pack our things. I want to be back in the rue Laborde tonight.’

*

‘Well,’ said Béchoux, when they were alone together again, ‘I admit that I do not see how you reconstructed the case so quickly.’

‘Quite simple, my dear Béchoux—like all my little *coups*. What faith that woman had in her husband!’

For a moment he was silent in admiration of his client.

‘Still,’ said Béchoux, ‘brilliant as you were, I fail to see where you get anything out of this for yourself!’

Barnett’s gaze grew dreamy.

‘That was a beautiful laboratory of the professor’s,’ he said. ‘By the way, Béchoux, do you happen to know the address of the biggest dye concern in the country? I may be paying them a call in the near future!’

Béchoux gave a curious gasp, rather like a slowly-expiring balloon.

‘Done me again!’ he breathed. ‘Stolen the paper—the formula of the secret process…’

Jim Barnett was moved to injured protest.

‘Dear old chap,’ he observed, ‘when it’s a question of rendering a service to one’s fellow-men and to one’s country, what *you* designate as theft becomes the sheerest heroism. It is the highest manifestation of duty’s sacred fire, blazing within the breast of mere man.’ He thumped himself significantly on the chest. ‘And personally, when duty calls, you will always find me ready, aye ready. Got that, Béchoux?’

But Béchoux was sunk in gloom.

‘I wonder,’ Barnett mused, ‘what they will call the new process? I think a suitable name might be—but there, I won’t bore you with my reflections, Béchoux. Only I can’t help feeling it would be rather touching to take out a patent in the name of—Lupin!’[1]

---

[1] Jim Barnett is one of the names adopted by Arsène Lupin, Leblanc’s central character, and a gentleman-burglar-turned-detective.

À propos de cette édition électronique

Texte libre de droits.

Corrections, édition, conversion informatique et publication par le groupe :

Ebooks libres et gratuits

http://fr.groups.yahoo.com/group/ebooksgratuits

Adresse du site web du groupe :
http://www.ebooksgratuits.com/

—

Janvier 2016

—

– **Élaboration de ce livre électronique** :

Les membres de *Ebooks libres et gratuits* qui ont participé à l'élaboration de ce livre, sont :

– **Dispositions** :

Les livres que nous mettons à votre disposition, sont des textes libres de droits, que vous pouvez utiliser librement, à une fin non commerciale et non professionnelle. Tout lien vers notre site est bienvenu…

– **Qualité** :

Les textes sont livrés tels quels sans garantie de leur intégrité parfaite par rapport à l'original. Nous rappelons que c'est un travail d'amateurs non rétribués et que nous essayons de promouvoir la culture littéraire avec de maigres moyens.

Votre aide est la bienvenue !

VOUS POUVEZ NOUS AIDER À FAIRE CONNAÎTRE CES CLASSIQUES LITTÉRAIRES.